From war to nationalism

China's turning point, 1924–1925

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Introduction

In the early autumn of 1924 the central government in Beijing ordered a military mobilization that was unlike anything seen before in Chinese history. The hour had arrived for a showdown in its long-smoldering dispute with Zhang Zuolin, "the Old Marshal" [*dashuai*], whose quasi-independent military kingdom in Manchuria posed a growing threat to the security of North China and the Beijing government. Fighting between allies of Beijing and of the Old Marshal had already been going on for almost three weeks in the Shanghai area; now the struggle had spread north. A vast and potentially decisive battle was taking shape at the border between China proper and Manchuria, at Shanhaiguan, the famous "first gate under heaven" in the Ming defense line, that was popularly called the Great Wall.[1] The central government's commander in chief was China's ablest general, Wu Peifu, a classically educated soldier whose military brilliance had won him the admiring epithet *yushuai*, "Jade Marshal." Like his rival, Wu hastened to concentrate all available forces at the critical point. And as Wu's troops and materiel were drawn from all of China north of the Yangzi, they were funneled by the rail network through Tianjin, a little more than 100 miles south of the front.

The first of the central government's troop trains rolled through Tianjin Central Station in the dead of night, at 1:00 A.M. on September 17. Thirty-four cars long, it was carrying 1,000 officers and men of the 23rd Division from Langfang, on the southeast outskirts of Beijing, toward a staging area at Luanzhou, some 100 miles farther north. By 10:00 A.M. eight more military trains had cleared the station. Six had carried officers and men of the 23rd Division – roughly 3,200 in all – one had carried equipment and one had been a hospital train. At 5:00 P.M.

1. The rather misleading term is of Western origin. See Arthur Waldron, *The Great Wall of China: From History to Myth* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

flatcars carrying an airplane squadron passed the station on their way north. By day's end fifteen military trains had cleared the station. Sixteen more trains followed on the eighteenth, twelve on the nineteenth, and eighteen each on the twentieth, twenty-first, and twenty-second. They were carrying field guns and ammunition, headquarters staff, airplanes, field kitchens, hospitals, cavalry, pack animals, coolies, and, above all, soldiers. The 23rd, 9th, and 13th Divisions and the 14th Mixed Brigade passed through Tianjin on the seventeenth, and seven trains of artillery alone on the twenty-first – parts of an unending stream.[2]

By September 26, 100,000 men, of an expected total of 200,000, had already been moved to the front, with the rest expected within a week. In all, nearly 300 trainloads of troops would go forward to the Manchurian frontier, moving an average of 300 miles each. To serve this mobilization, Wu Peifu placed transportation under military control and requisitioned almost the entire rolling stock of railways north of the Yangzi River. Crews worked double shifts, and discipline was enforced at gunpoint.[3]

To support these massive ground forces, Wu sent air and naval units north as well. The air force of the central government consisted of eighty-three planes, based in peacetime at Nanyuan, Baoding, and Luoyang. These were now deployed as four squadrons: one at Beijing, one at Tianjin, one at Changli, and one at Beidaihe.[4] The Bohai naval fleet commanded by Wen Shude had seven ships; these were now augmented by more vessels from the south. Among the fleet assembling from Nanjing, Shanghai, and Qingdao, were two cruisers, the *Haishen* and the *Chaohe*, the destroyer *Tongan*, and two gunboats, the *Yongxiang* and the *Chuyu*. On September 21 China's finest warship, the *Haiqi*, a second-class, steel-protected cruiser (built at Elswick in 1898) and armed with two 8-inch and ten 4.7-inch guns, sailed for the north. The fleet was gathering off the coast of Manchuria in preparation for a maneuver never before attempted in Chinese warfare: an amphibious landing, of the sort the Japanese had used against the Chinese in Korea thirty years earlier, to envelop Zhang Zuolin's forces from the rear.[5]

Foreign attachés, monitoring these developments closely, found no-

2. Headquarters U.S. Army Forces in China, Office G–2 Military Intelligence, Tientsin. Intelligence Bulletins nos. 2–11, September 22–26, 1924, in Military Intelligence Reports (hereafter cited as MIR).
3. J. E. Baker, "Chinese Military Rail Transport," CWR, December 20, 1924, pp. 73, 78; *New York Times* (hereafter cited as NYT), September 26, 1924, p. 23.
4. Li Tianmin, *Zhongguo hangkong zhanggu* (Taibei: Zhongguo de kongjun chubanshe, 1973), p. 42; Mao Jinling, "Beiyang zhixi jundui zhi yangjin" (Ph.D. dissertation, National Taiwan University, 1987), p. 111; NYT, September 20, 1924, p. 6; Anthony B. Chan, *Arming the Chinese: The Western Armaments Trade in Warlord China, 1920–1928* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1982), p. 120.
5. Mao Jinling, p. 111; NYT, September 22, 1924, p. 1.

thing exotically East Asian about the armies they watched mobilizing. If anything, the Chinese forces moving in 1924 were uncannily reminiscent of the ones most of them had come to know well in the great European war that had begun just a decade before. All wore World War I–style uniforms; some had helmets with a battered French eagle on their crests.[6] Nor did the similarities end with uniforms and armaments. We will see how in China in 1924 – as in Europe of 1914 – a series of seemingly minor local conflicts triggered a great conflict the course and consequences of which would be far different from what any of the participants wanted or expected.

This seeming accident of history should perhaps not have been a surprise. The year 1924 was not just any year. It was what the Chinese call a *Jiazi* year, after the two characters that designate it – in the calendar used since ancient times – as beginning an entirely new cycle of sixty years.[7] By tradition such years brought change. So it was entirely fitting that it should have witnessed great wars whose impact was felt in every area of Chinese life; wars, indeed, that changed the course of modern Chinese history. This book tells their story.

Two major and related conflicts were fought in *Jiazi* year, each reflecting the rivalry between the party in control of the central government, usually called Zhili, after the province in which Beijing lay, and Zhang Zuolin, whose party was usually called Fengtian, after the name of the southernmost of the three provinces of Manchuria. The first of these conflicts was the Jiangsu–Zhejiang War (August 28–October 12). It was a contest for control of the pivotal area of the lower Yangzi valley, and Shanghai in particular, with its strategic position and unparalleled wealth. This first war ended with victory by regional forces aligned with the central government, and the Zhili party that controlled it. The high-stakes war in the Yangzi valley, however, sent tremors through the whole Chinese political system, which touched off the much larger Second Zhili–Fengtian War (September 17–October 23). It was fought directly between Zhili and Fengtian. Each side threw everything they had into it because, throughout, it seemed to promise a decisive victory for one or the other. It ended, however, in political and military chaos worse than anything seen since the abdication of the Qing dynasty a dozen years earlier.

6. Lawrence Impey, *The Chinese Army as a Military Force*, 2nd ed. (Tientsin: Tientsin Press, Ltd., 1926), illustration facing p. 22.
7. See, e.g., Gu Tiaosun, *Jiazi neiluan shimou jishi* (Shanghai: Zhonghua shuju, 1924); He Xiya, "Jiazi dazhanhou quanguo jundui zhi diaocha," *Dongfang zazhi* **22** (1925): no. 1, 103–12; no. 2, 34–57; no. 3, 69–83. Chinese commonly used cyclical characters to designate major events, but material from the time makes clear that the particular significance of the *Jiazi* year was not lost on them.

Militarily, these wars marked the arrival in China of fighting in the style of World War I in Europe, something new and deeply destabilizing. *Jiazi* year saw the first example in Chinese history of a new kind of war fighting: *liti zhan* – "three dimensional" or "combined arms warfare," in which operations by infantry, cavalry, ships, and aircraft were coordinated in the service of a single strategic plan. This in turn was the product of the technological revolution in warfare that had begun for Europe in the mid-nineteenth century. That same revolution had been at work in China at least since the establishment there of the first Western-style arsenal in 1861. Sixty-three years later the result was, for the first time in China, recognizably modern war.[8]

The combatants used machine guns, airplanes, barbed wire, and mines. "File closers" (to shoot deserters) followed the troops into battle. Half a million men were thrown into the fighting; nine provinces were engulfed in the war zones; and fourteen in all were directly affected. The wars more than absorbed the Beijing government's entire budget. The fighting was bloodier and more bitter than in any struggle since the nineteenth century.[9] True, the scale of the struggles was not remotely comparable to World War I in Europe. But in terms even of the recent Chinese past, they were absolutely unprecedented. Even foreigners were impressed.[10]

The wars of *Jiazi* year are little known today, even among specialists, and even in China. Still less do most people suspect their critical importance in the history of twentieth-century China. The standard works treat them but with extreme brevity and no sense of their implications. The classic textbook of Chinese history, *East Asia: The Modern Transformation*, devotes only four lines in reduced-size type to the events that are the subject of this book, dismissing them as meaningless "marching and countermarching."[11]

Yet the destructive and costly modern warfare that was unleashed on

8. I use the term advisedly. See Reid Mitchell, "The First Modern War, R.I.P." *Reviews in American History* (December 1989): 552–8.
9. Guo Jianlin, "Liang ci Zhi Feng zhanzheng zhi bijiao." *Lishi dangan* 1987: no. 3, 108–12; Hsi-sheng Ch'i, *Warlord Politics in China 1916–1928* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1976), pp. 137–8.
10. Ronald Macleay to Ramsay MacDonald, September 5, 1924, Foreign Office (FO) 371/10245.
11. John K. Fairbank, Edwin O. Reischauer, and Albert M. Craig, *East Asia: The Modern Transformation* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965), p. 657. Outside of the specialized literature to be cited below, probably the best accounts remain Li Chien-nung, *The Political History of China, 1840–1928*, trans. and ed. Ssu-yu Teng and Jeremy Ingalls (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1956) and, for foreign relations, Hosea Ballou Morse and Harley Farnsworth MacNair, *Far Eastern International Relations* (Cambridge, Mass.: Houghton Mifflin, 1931).

China in 1924 brought with it a host of powerful and unanticipated effects and consequences. These ranged across society, politics, and economics, and ultimately had a great impact on thought and the arts. It is with these effects, as much as with the war itself, that this book is concerned. It is these effects, furthermore, that made the conflicts of 1924 a turning point – not only in Chinese warfare but also in the broad processes of the rise of nationalism and the emergence of revolution.

The wars of 1924 devastated the Chinese economy and visited a host of ills on society and politics. The Beijing government was bankrupted. Private finance, investment, and trade were shaken; the war caused many bankruptcies. Violence spread, and a sense of insecurity gradually became pervasive in society. Nor did the wars discussed here have physical impact only: their intangible effects can be detected in the intellectual and artistic realms. In China, as in Europe a decade earlier, modern war destroyed confidence in the status quo and led many to seek understanding of social change and cataclysm in ideas, mostly originating on the Left, whose influence had hitherto been limited. New questions were asked about Chinese society itself. What was wrong? Was the problem wars, or somehow War? If the latter, how was it caused? New words – such as *junfa* [warlord], indicative of a whole new way of thinking about violence – came into wide usage. New sensibilities and styles revealed themselves in areas from the novel to cartooning.

Nevertheless, I maintain that by far the most important consequence of the wars described was the rise of a nationalist and revolutionary movement that got under way a few months after the fighting had ended. It is in connection with this that I propose the most substantial modification in the way we think about the epochal changes that took place in the 1920s.

Most studies of early twentieth-century Chinese history skip from the May Fourth demonstration of 1919 to the May Thirtieth Movement of 1925 and the "great revolution" [*da geming*] that followed. Indeed, before the words "The Chinese Revolution" were transferred to mean the events of 1949, they referred to the fall of that regime that had ruled China since 1912 from Beijing and its replacement in 1927 by the government of the Kuomintang, or Nationalist Party, which ruled from Nanjing.[12]

In most narratives these are the events to which almost exclusive attention is paid. The political and economic events – indeed, even the

12. As in Harold Isaacs, *The Tragedy of the Chinese Revolution*, 1938, 2d rev. ed. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, reprint ed., 1961); Dorothy Borg, *American Policy and the Chinese Revolution, 1925–1928* (New York: American Institute of Pacific Relations, 1947; reprint ed., with new introduction by the author, New York: Octagon Books, 1968).

wars – that were at least their context and, I would argue, their permissive cause as well, are thoroughly neglected. Thus, the classic textbook mentioned restores a normal typeface when narration of the 1920s turns away from warfare to what is usually called China's "national revolution." First comes the incident of May 30, 1925, in Shanghai, when nine Chinese demonstrating against foreign privileges were shot dead by police as they threatened the Louza police station just off Nanjing Road in the International Settlement. Then follows the May Thirtieth Movement, which saw a tide of violent and uncontrollable demonstrations against foreign privilege sweep over the rest of the country. Next to be described is the Kuomintang's Northern Expedition, launched just a year later from Guangzhou by the charismatic general Chiang Kai-shek which, riding that tide, defeated armies controlled by Beijing and established a new National government at Nanjing in 1927. And finally the story arrives at that regime's decisive victory over the remnants of the Beijing government in the North in June of the following year.

The story of these events has been told many times but almost always without posing the most important questions. Why did the Beijing government fall at all? Given that it did fall, why did its crisis begin so suddenly – and as will be seen, so unexpectedly – in 1925? Why not in 1924, or even in 1919? None of these questions can be approached without a clear understanding of developments in the first four years of the decade of the 1920s. And unless the full impact of the wars of 1924 is taken into consideration, they cannot be answered satisfactorily at all.

But by and large the collapse of the Northern System of government and its replacement by the Nanjing administration have not seemed to most historians to demand much in the way of detailed explanation. The period from 1912 to 1927 when Beijing was the capital of the Chinese Republic is often still thought of in stereotyped terms; as a time of meaningless chaos and confusion; of "warlord domination" in the provinces and "comic opera government" in the capital.[13] Neither its politics nor its military affairs have been thoroughly studied (although we have some excellent studies of individual militarists).[14] That such a regime

13. "For over a decade now, imperial government has given way to comic opera government." Josef Washington Hall [Upton Close], *In the Land of the Laughing Buddha* (New York: Putnam, 1924), p. xvi.

14. Among the most important Western-language works on the topic are Jerome Ch'en, *The Military–Gentry Coalition: China Under the Warlords* (University of Toronto–York University Joint Centre on Modern East Asia Publications Series, vol. 1, no. 4 (Toronto: University of Toronto–York University Joint Centre on Modern East Asia, 1979); His-sheng Ch'i, *Warlord Politics in China 1916–1928* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1976); Donald G. Gillin, *Warlord: Yen Hsi-shan in Shansi Province 1911–1949* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1967); Diana Lary, *Region and Nation: The Kwangsi Clique in Chinese Politics 1925–1937* (Cambridge, England: Cam-

should have been swept away seems scarcely surprising to most writers. So scholarly attention has focused not on the origins of this change but, rather, overwhelmingly on its effects: on society, economy, and above all on foreign relations.[15]

Such explanation as there is of the end of the Beijing regime focuses largely on the concept of nationalist revolution. The May Thirtieth Movement is depicted as part of a great nationalistic wave that swept all before it, propelling radical social change, and not only that of the Nationalists but that of the Communists as well.

The limitations of this approach, however, are beginning to become evident. The period from 1912 to 1927 is increasingly recognized as one of vigorous economic, social, and intellectual development. And far from being the "comic opera government" sometimes portrayed, the Beijing regime is being understood to have had real institutional and political strengths; enough in any case to make its ultimate military defeat and replacement by the Nationalist government of the Kuomintang far from inevitable. The Beijing government's control of China was limited but not perhaps more limited than would be Chiang Kai-shek's (in 1928 he exercised military control over 7% of China's provinces; by 1936 that figure had only risen to 25%).[16] The western Powers and Japan recognized Beijing as the government of China and expected it to continue to fill that role: that was one of the most basic premises of the Washington treaties of 1922, which in effect constituted a carefully hedged but nevertheless real vote of confidence in its future. And within China the Beijing government enjoyed a higher degree of legitimacy than is sometimes recognized: as Andrew Nathan notes in the *Cambridge History of China*, "until 1923, if not later, many leaders of public opinion,

bridge University Press, 1975); Gavan McCormack, *Chang Tso-lin in Northeast China, 1911–1928: China, Japan, and the Manchurian Ideal* (Folkestone, Kent, England: Dawson & Sons, 1977); Andrew J. Nathan, *Peking Politics 1918–1923: Factionalism and the Failure of Constitutionalism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976); James L. Sheridan, *Chinese Warlord: The Career of Feng Yü-hsiang* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1966); Donald S. Sutton, *Provincial Militarism and the Chinese Republic: The Yunnan Army, 1905–25* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1980); Odoric Y. K. Wou, *Militarism in Modern China: The Career of Wu P'ei-Fu, 1916–39* (Folkestone, Kent, England: Dawson & Sons; also Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1978).

15. Among the most important works treating the impact of developments in China on international relations are Dorothy Borg, *American Policy and the Chinese Revolution, 1925–1928* (New York: American Institute of Pacific Relations, 1947; reprint ed., with new introduction by the author, New York: Octagon Books, 1968); Akira Iriye, *After Imperialism: The Search for a New Order in the Far East 1921–1931* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1965); Warren I. Cohen, *America's Response to China: An Interpretative History of Sino-American Relations*, 2d ed. (New York: Knopf, 1980); Katsumi Usui, *Nihon to Chūgoku: Taishō jidai* (Tokyo: Hara Shobō, 1972).
16. Hsi-sheng Ch'i, *Nationalist China at War: Military Defeats and Political Collapse, 1937–45* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1982), p. 23.

while deploring the feuding and corruption of politicians, voiced hope in the ultimate success of the constitutional order" on which it was theoretically based. Finally, despite retrospective condemnation by nationalistic writers, nowhere were the Beijing government's successes greater than in foreign policy: its Ministry of Foreign Affairs "had more power and independence, more continuity, better personnel, more positive policies and nationalistic motivations than most people realize." Yet, as Nathan observes, these achievements largely "remain to be studied."[17]

As for the rising tide of nationalism, there was a time earlier in this century when such an idea was easily accepted. It seemed so natural and intuitively comprehensible that scholars confronted with political or social change could simply invoke nationalism to explain them, and be finished – but no longer. Nationalism is now recognized as an elusive concept: It cannot be taken for granted as a self-sufficient explanatory tool but, rather, must itself be better understood. Invoking it explains very little; instead, it creates new problems.[18]

Taken together, empirical reexamination of the period of the Beijing government and theoretical reevaluation of China's national revolution bring us to a question. If the Beijing government was in fact far more than a mere interlude, then how are we to account for its decisive defeat by the Kuomintang, a force that at the start of the Northern Expedition was certainly far weaker in nearly every way one can measure? And in particular, if we cannot look to "nationalism" to solve the problem, then where can we find an answer? I insist that we must look to the potent agency of war.

Modern China, like nearly every other state, has been formed chiefly by war. War is a powerful and capricious historical actor that regularly confounds historians who try to tame it. It refuses to accept dependent status and follow easily along the contours of the economic, social, or intellectual developments that are usually considered primary. Rather, it cuts across other lines of causation, intervening to overturn and trans-

17. Andrew J. Nathan, "A Constitutional Republic: The Peking Government, 1916–28" in *The Cambridge History of China*, vol. 12, *Republican China 1912–1949, Part 1*, ed. John K. Fairbank (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 266, 268, quoting Sow-theng Leong, *Sino-Soviet Diplomatic Relations, 1917–1926* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1976), pp. 268, 294–5.

18. Such at least is the approach of an increasing number of scholars. See, for example, Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983); Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World – A Derivative Discourse?* (London: Zed Books for the United Nations University, 1986); and Miroslav Hroch, *Social Conditions of National Revival in Europe: A Comparative Analysis of the Social Composition of Patriotic Groups among the Smaller European Nations* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1985), as well as my review essay, "Theories of Nationalism and Historical Explanation," *World Politics* 37 (April 1985): no. 3, 416–33.

form human society in unexpected and inscrutable ways. And as it was with World War I in the West, the effects of the wars of 1924 on Chinese politics and society were largely unexpected and, frankly, often contrary to the intentions of the combatants. Yet these wars were perhaps the most crucial of all factors in causing the events of the 1920s with which all are familiar. The May Thirtieth Movement and the Northern Expedition could never have succeeded without the prior occurrence of multiple shifts in China's life: military, political, economic, social, and even intellectual. And if that is the case, then these wars were indeed a major turning point, for without the victory of the Kuomintang, for which they prepared the way, all that followed – even including the rise of the Communists to power – would have been different.

This book treats both the technical aspects of warfare and the larger considerations of its consequences. It begins with a general survey of China on the eve of the wars, under what I call the "Northern System." Then it examines the political origins of the military showdown and the strategies of the contenders. This is followed by analysis of resources, particularly weapons and their capabilities, an account of the fighting, and the unexpected denouement. This political and military narrative, however, is intended to serve a deeper purpose.

The spur to writing this book has come not from a fascination with the details of warfare but, rather, from a general interest in the phenomena of nationalism and revolution, and dissatisfaction with the way historians have treated both in China during the pivotal decade of the 1920s. Neither nationalism nor revolution is very useful as an explanatory concept. Quite the opposite: each is in itself a historical problem, and a very difficult one. Yet for China, nationalism in particular has been taken – until recently – to be a sort of universal explanatory concept, the prime mover of change (as will be seen in detail in the "Conclusion" of this book) from the nineteenth century to the present. Such an approach is intellectually unsatisfactory, for it takes what should be the problem – why the explosion of nationalism that transformed Chinese politics in the 1920s? – and makes it into the explanation: rising nationalism – a given – caused new politics (which then get all the attention).

Therefore, although the book is narrowly focused on a series of key events, the broader history of nationalism in China – and in many other countries – has always been in my mind as I have written it. My belief is that nationalism – and revolution too, with which it is often associated – are usually better analyzed as consequences than as causes. Both are often portrayed as powerful autonomous actors – in the forms of swelling national sentiment or mass revolutionary unrest – but in fact neither is commonly found except in association with other factors. Both tend to

appear in situations in which existing institutions are in crisis, and such crises, since the French Revolution, have often as not been military in their origins. To note this fact is not to argue that nationalist feelings or the desire for revolution are caused by war: their deeper roots in economic, social, and intellectual developments are generally recognized. But their moves to center stage and opportunities for success almost always occur as part of some other and unrelated change. Usually they can rise to dominance only after some other force has destroyed the hitherto existing order. This, I argue, is what happened in China during the 1920s. In these years war became a dominant fact of Chinese life, and within the sequence of wars, those of 1924 had a pivotal importance. Indeed, in their own way they were every bit as important to Chinese history as the May Fourth Movement.

The reason, however, is not intrinsic to the wars. It has to do with their broader effects – the possibilities they foreclosed, the structural changes they caused, and the intellectual and cultural transitions they spurred. The wars of 1924 had many secondary effects on society at large; these effects, treated in the second half of the text, are the key links in my analysis, for what the book is really about is how the wars changed China. It shows how they gravely undermined the political cohesion and military capacity of the Beijing government while strengthening its rivals for power. It demonstrates that new patterns of conflict and political alignment consequently arose and persisted through the 1930s and beyond. It discusses how the fighting brought chaos to trade and commerce in some of China's richest and economically most advanced regions while sending waves of panic through financial and credit markets.

The book reveals that war disrupted the lives of all Chinese, particularly those of the politically important urban merchants, students, and workers. Furthermore, war devastated the international policies toward China that had been worked out at the Washington Conference of 1921–2, and stimulated a shift in the way Chinese thought about their nation's problems. This in turn led at the war's end to a rapid adoption of the radical and revolutionary vocabulary of the Left and a new receptiveness to the politics of the Left. These developments all provide the indispensable background to the events of the year 1925 – and more broadly, for understanding what we call, usually without thinking about precisely what we mean, China's "National Revolution" of the 1920s.